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ABSTRACT

A process was developed for planning the evaluation component of national adult education conferences. Study activities included a literature review of conference planning documents, structured interviews with past conference chairpersons and evaluators, and analysis of documents from national adult education conferences. A set of 15 activities was identified that most past conference chairpersons and evaluators viewed as essential for the evaluation planning process. These activities were evaluation committee selection; communication between the evaluation committee and other groups; review of reports, correspondence, and minutes from past conferences; a debriefing meeting between current year's and next year's evaluators and conference chairpersons; definition of the purpose of the conference evaluation; establishment of policies, requirements, and arrangements for the evaluation committee; design of evaluation to serve the needs of primary audiences; design of evaluation plan to include technical standards; establishment of evaluation budget; preparation of the management plan; orientation and training; the evaluation; presentation of evaluation information at the post-conference evaluation meeting; evaluation report preparation; and report dissemination. Other findings were that evaluation committee members often do not carry out activities; a lack of continuity from one conference to the next exists; and no policies or guidelines for evaluation planning exist. (YLB)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PROCESS FOR PLANNING THE EVALUATION COMPONENT OF NATIONAL ADULT EDUCATION CONFERENCES

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University of Pittsburgh, 1981

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The purpose of this study was to develop a process for planning the evaluation component of national adult education conferences. A review of the literature on planning evaluation for conferences revealed that evaluation is considered the life-blood of good conferences and a powerful educational tool. This study is unable to support Hampton's (1973) claim that evaluation has the potential of being one of the most powerful administrative tools available to educators. But the study does support Hampton's charge that evaluation tends to break down because educators fail to review their program adequately for improving future programs. It appears that national adult education conference planners need to place more emphasis on the development, dissemination, and timing of the conference evaluation reports. Further research is needed to study the dissemination process.

It was shown in this study that Bass and Vaugh's (1966) and Beckards (1976) recommendation that evaluation should be an integral part of the total planning process from beginning to end, especially in the initial planning stages, was not followed. However, there is no evidence in this study that the conferences suffered as a result. Further research would be needed to study the initial evaluation planning process.

Mueller's (1975) claim that evaluation is the life-blood of good conferences may be an overstatement at least as far as national adult education conferences are concerned. Standard information is not collected from year to year, and the evaluative questions are not systemically focused on purposes from one conference to the next. The evaluation data are not building to answer important conference or association questions from one conference to the next. Further research on the design of a longitudinal evaluation plan would be useful.

The results of this study were consistent with the Successful Meetings claim that "less than 2% of meeting planners go through the process to establish clear goals and objectives for their conference" (1980, p. 2). None of the past five national adult education conferences established evaluation goals and objectives for the conference. Further research is needed on what type of evaluation goals and objectives should be established for national adult education conferences.

Results of this study supported Stakes' (1981) claim that:

> Adult educators are often forced into evaluating programs with little or no exposure to the process of assessing merit of educational phenomena. Yet practitioners should have knowledge of the evaluation process in adult education. (p. 4)

It appears that conference leaders need to place more emphasis on the conceptualization of evaluation for national adult education conferences. The findings show there is a discrepancy between the Stufflebeam model and what is occurring in practice. Further research is needed on how to provide inservice training for practitioners in regard to the concept of evaluation, evaluation design, and its applications.

There is evidence that the national adult education conference evaluations are incomplete. There is no evidence that the conferences are unsatisfactory. The conference evaluations do not reveal what it is that made the conferences satisfactory. Therefore it is not clear what effect on the quality of the conference will be derived from the process for planning the evaluation component developed in this study. The literature makes it seem likely that use of the evaluation process that follows would have a favorable impact on the quality of national adult education conferences. Further research would be needed before one could assess its real value.

The review of literature established that to conceptualize evaluation is the first step in developing written procedures and standards for evaluation. Fifteen evaluation planning elements from the literature and empirical bases were identified as those most likely to be included by evaluators in their planning.

The conference planning documents were analyzed using the following Stufflebeam (1974) questions regarding the conceptualizing of evaluation.

1. What is evaluation?
2. What purposes should evaluation serve?
3. What questions should be addressed?
4. Who performs the evaluations?
5. What audiences are to be served?
6. What is the design of the evaluation?
7. How is evaluation evaluated?
8. What information does the evaluation require?

The conference documents were incomplete according to the questions. Therefore, structured interviews were conducted to compensate for this weakness.

Eleven structured interviews were conducted to elicit information from past conference chairpersons and evaluators about the process for planning the evaluation component of national adult education conferences. The interviews described past practices for planning the evaluation component, modified and sequenced the planning steps, and recommended ways to standardize certain features of the conference evaluation in the future. A panel of four past and future national adult education leaders verified the suggested changes in the sequence of steps in the evaluation process.

Nine pertinent documents associated with the last five national adult education conferences were acquired through the AEA and NAPCAE offices and through information provided during the structural interviews. The documents were analyzed using the following descriptors or key words: committee composition, communication channels, past records, post conference meetings, policies, definition, purpose evaluation design, planning groups, management plan, budget, orientation and training, evaluation report, and dissemination. Data from the analysis of documents and the structured interviews were used by the researcher to recommend a general process for planning the evaluation component of national adult education conferences.

The findings of this study were:

1. A set of activities was identified that most past conference chairpersons and evaluators viewed as essential for the evaluation planning process. These activities might occur in different order for different purposes. The steps are:

a. Selection of the committee - The evaluation committee members should have a positive attitude toward evaluation and should be able to motivate others favorably toward evaluation. The committee members should have the background and skills necessary to accomplish the purpose of the conference evaluation. The committee should have enough members to carry out the evaluation plan, an understaffed committee is detrimental to a successful evaluation project. If graduate students or other volunteers are used, it should be understood that they are not always dependable; special orientation and training sessions may be necessary for them so they understand the importance of the evaluation. If an interstate committee is formed, it should be understood that the members may never be able to get together to meet. It may be necessary to arrange telephone or video conferences for this type of committee.

b. Communications with the evaluation committee and other groups - The evaluation committee should have a working relationship with the central planning committee and other appropriate planning sub-committees. Ideally, the chairperson of the evaluation committee should be a member of the central planning committee. The evaluation committee members should have a good working relationship with the groups that the evaluation will serve. Some of these groups might be the funding agencies, program planners, presenters, participants, content specialists, or legislators. The evaluation committee chairperson should communicate

with past conference evaluators to discuss this year's evaluation plan.

c. Review reports, correspondence, and minutes received from past conferences - Some conference planners feel that this step should be completed before anything else. The evaluation committee chairperson as well as the conference chairperson should review past evaluation reports, correspondence, and minutes. Past records can help the evaluation committee conceptualize the project and to point out problems or successful evaluation techniques practiced at past conferences. No evaluation committee should be "reinventing the wheel."

d. Receive information at post conference meeting preceding your annual conference - This meeting is a must for both the evaluation and conference chairpersons. It is a debriefing meeting between this year's and next year's conference planning committees. The evaluator can be an asset at this meeting by reporting hard data and facts related to the conference. This is a good way for this year's and next year's conference evaluators to meet and establish a formal communication.

e. Define the purpose of the evaluation for your conference - Some conference planners strongly recommended that this step should be first. They also recommended that the evaluation committee members be selected according to the background and skills required to accomplish the purpose of the evaluation. This is perfectly acceptable and can be done first if it is preferable to the evaluation committee chairperson. The conference evaluation chairperson should work closely with the overall conference chairperson.

There are many reasons the conference planners might want to conduct evaluation. Some of these reasons are: to account for funds or resources; to monitor the planning process; to identify potential participant needs and establish program emphasis; to identify collaboration opportunities; to assess coordination efforts with other institutions and agencies; to identify program weaknesses; and to assess progress toward stated goals. The purposes can be organized into one or more of the following categories: past activities or outcomes, current program activities, or possible future actions.

The definition for the evaluation can be selected after the purpose of the evaluation is determined. Some definitions to consider are as follows--

> Documenting the congruence of learner outcomes and program objectives (Tyler, 1950)
>
> Comparing performance data with a commonly accepted standard (Popham, 1969; Provus, 1969; Rivilin, 1971)
>
> Specifying, obtaining, and providing relevant information for judging decision alternatives. (Alkin, 1967, Stufflebeam, 1969 & 1971)
>
> Comparing actual effects of a program with a variety of demonstrated needs. (Scriven, 1972)

Judging program merit against the value positions of relevant audiences. (McDonald, 1974; Owens, 1973; Rippey, 1973; Stake, 1974)

Judging a program critically, using expert knowledge (Eisner, 1969)

Describing and interpreting the wider context in which a program functions (Parlett and Hamilton, 1976) (Grotelueschen, 1980, p. 76)

Ideally, the association should develop a longitudinal evaluation plan with the purpose of the evaluation for each annual conference stated. The purpose of the evaluations could be identified by the AEA and NAPCAE Boards, or by any other appropriate committee or groups from the associations.

f. Establish policies, requirements, and arrangements for the evaluation committee - It is recommended that written policies, requirements, and arrangements be prepared on how to conduct evaluations for annual conferences for the association. The policy manual should include the purposes of the evaluation, the questions to be addressed, who will perform the evaluations, the audiences to be served, the evaluation design, and how the evaluation is to be evaluated. Information describing how the data is to be collected, analyzed, and how the results will be used will be included. In addition, there should be a discussion about whose purposes the evaluation will serve and how to resolve potential value conflicts. Provisions for space, information retrieval equipment, materials, and funds should be discussed. Dissemination procedures should be outlined and how to apprise the association members about the evaluation results should be discussed.

g. Design the evaluation to serve the needs of particular groups - It is suggested that primary audiences be identified early so that the information needs can be obtained. Information may be obtained through structured interviews (telephone or mail), surveys, questionnaires. Some suggested audiences are: conference planners, conference presenters, conference participants, association members, association committees, association commissions or sections, association staff, funding agencies, content specialists, or legislators.

h. Design the evaluation plan to include technical standards - No formal evaluation criteria were specified in any of the five conference evaluations. However, recommendations about how to improve the evaluation planning processes were made by some of the conference planners. Most of the recommendations related to the management of the evaluations rather than technical standards. Stufflebeam (1971) and the Phi Delta Kappa National Study Committee on Evaluation, the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (1978), and Cook and Gruder (1978) are important recent additions to the literature on standards which could be used to develop technical standards for conference evaluations.

i. Establish the evaluation budget - None of the past national adult education conferences had a special budget for evaluation. The money required for the evaluation came from the overall budget. However, findings of this study indicate that there is a need for written guidelines for the total conference as well as the evaluation committee, including the budget. It is recommended that money be available for special innovations (e.g., computer systems) over the next five years.

j. Prepare the management plan for the evaluation - Each evaluation effort should have a management plan. The plan includes a description of: the evaluation; committees assigned to conduct the evaluation; the channels which can influence policy information and administrative decision making; the established policy and procedures that govern the evaluation; the evaluation staff; the facilities (space, equipment, and materials); the data gathering instruments; the reporting schedule; what evaluation training will be provided to what groups and who will provide it; the use of the findings; and the budget.

k. Orientation and training - Evaluation staff, volunteers, and graduate students, and possibly selected conference planners should be provided training regarding evaluation.

l. Carry out the evaluation - The evaluation management plan should be used as an outline to carry out the evaluation. Details such as how to organize the evaluation, and how to type, print, and copy the evaluation forms. Distribution and collection of the evaluation forms was reported to be critical. Evaluation forms have been lost at more than one conference. Someone should be in charge of the security of the evaluation data.

m. Provide evaluation at the post conference evaluation meeting immediately following your annual meeting - The evaluator should be in attendance at this meeting. If possible hard data should be presented to the next evaluator and other conference planners. If the computer is used, standard demographic information could be available for use at the conference or at least by the end of the conference. Written and oral evaluation information should be transferred. If possible, a secretary should be on hand to take notes in shorthand to be transcribed later.

n. Prepare evaluation report - The evaluation report should include the following: title page, table of contents, preface (or acknowledgements), abstract, introduction, goals and objectives, procedures, analysis of data (findings), summary, conclusions and recommendations, and appendices. The procedures should include information about the: committee composition, communication channels, past records, post conference meetings, definition, purpose, policies, planning groups, evaluation design, budget, management plan, orientation and training, and dissemination.

o. Disseminate evaluation report - Dissemination of the evaluation report is one of the most critical steps in the evaluation process. The evaluation report should be completed approximately one month after the conference and made available to next year's planning group and other appropriate decision makers at that time. It is recommended that the dissemination process be standardized, and the recipients and repository of the information be identified. It is important that the evaluation results be published in the association's journals or other professional organs. It is important for the association members to know how well they did at the annual conference.

2. When the evaluation committee should be selected is not clear. Some conference leaders identified the need to clarify the purposes of the conference and the evaluation first. Initial planning of evaluation may be needed before committee memebers (and staff) are identified.

3. Getting individuals to carry out the required activities was difficult in the past. At times committee members dropped out, data were not collected, and reports were not written.

4. There has been a lack of continuity from one conference to the next. Evaluative questions were not developed systemically. At times evaluation goals and objectives were not written, reports were not written, and mistakes were repeated because communication was slow or non-existent.

5. There are no policies or guidelines on how to plan the evaluation for national adult education conferences. Similarities in the past evaluation procedures are coincidental rather than systematic.

It is recommended that there be a general process for planning the evaluation component of national adult education conferences.

The results suggest that research studies should be conducted in order to assess the value of the process. The process could be studied at state as well as national conferences.

The lack of evaluation policies or guidelines indicates a need for studies that would generate procedures for planning the evaluation of national adult education conferences. Additional information is needed on how to carry out the evaluation planning process, e.g., techniques, examples, standardized forms, computer technology, etc.

The results suggest that an analysis of the initial evaluation planning steps would be of value. This seems especially important because the conference leaders did not agree on the order of the initial planning steps.

The findings of this study indicate that studies of the evaluation dissemination process would be of value. Lack of dissemination proocedures has caused mistakes to be repeated and a lack of continuity from one conference to the next.

Results of this study show that studies on how to design a longitudinal evaluation plan to answer important association and conference questions would be of value. Past practices indicate that the national adult education conference evaluative questions have not been planned in a systematic manner. It is recommended that the plan be designed for at least a five year period.

In light of the findings of this study, further research would be of value to identify criteria on what makes a national adult education conference satisfactory. If conference quality criteria were known, then one could evaluate a conference. Based on the findings of this study, one might raise questions concerning the advisability of continuing to evaluate conferences as they have been done in the past.

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